

PRESS CLIPS

By Alexander Cockburn

'The Most Dangerous Moment'

A couple of articles in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* last Saturday, October 4, demonstrated by implication that the US press had missed for nearly a week the most important story so far of the war between Iran and Iraq.

To start at the beginning: by the preceding weekend (September 27-28) the Iraqis—then apparently doing well with a string of communique victories, unsubstantiated in military fact—were prevailing upon Oman, the sultanate overlooking the strait of Hormuz from the southern side, to give facilities to about 10 of their Super Freilon troop-carrying helicopters. These helicopters were to attack and take over the three islands at the western end of the strait, namely the Greater and Lesser Tunbs, and the islet of Abu Moussa.

These island are presently controlled by Iran, even through the lesser Tunb has no one on it, and the Greater T only 70 or so Iranian troops. Their importance is symbolic, but had the Iraqis occupied them, the Iranians would almost certainly in their turn have moved to block the strait. They could have mined them, or simply rendered them impassable by use of shore artillery or torpedoes. The technicalities of interdiction are not that important. Any advertised Iranian threat to traffic would instantly cause a tanker standstill, since no insurance company would be willing to assume the risk. No tanker owner without insurance coverage is going to wait to find out exactly how the Iranians are proposing to block the strait, thus stop the oil flow and bring Civilization As We Know It to its knees.

On Saturday, September 27, Lord Carrington—the British foreign secretary—visited Washington after attending the UN General Assembly in New York. Carrington in fact prolonged his stay, and postponed a planned visit to the Far East. No comment on his trip to Washington appeared in the US press.

On the following Monday, September 29, the London *Financial Times* ran a front-page story reporting that the Iraqis were planning to attack and occupy the three islands mentioned above. Four days later, on October 3, the *Financial Times* ran a second story, under the headline "US Response Moderated by British Advice". The report dealt with Carrington's visit to Washington the previous weekend and his discussion with administration officials there. "Lord Carrington's party," it said,

"which cancelled a scheduled trip to China to prolong the discussions, was struck by the contrast between the apparent calm with which the war is being treated publicly in the media, and the gravity of top-level US talks about counter action."

The implication of the story was that Carrington had happened upon a Carter administration which had been appraised of the Iraqi threat to the strait and was intent on drastic intervention. It went on, "The forceful American suggestions [about intervention] came last weekend at what now appears to have been the most dangerous moment of the war so far, when a number of Iraqi troop-carrying helicopters arrived in Oman, apparently in preparation for an assault on three disputed Iranian-held islands near the strait of Hormuz."

There are in fact two differing accounts of what Carrington and his team discovered in Washington. One proposes that Carrington—quite aware of the Iraqi plan—was horrified to discover that the Carter folk were not taking the danger particularly seriously. The other is as implied by the *Financial Times* story, namely, that Carrington found the Americans on the edge of military adventure: the "surprise" presidential military initiative so feared by Reagan's camp.

In the event, the *Financial Times* story predicting the Iraqi move and pressure from British and the Americans deterred the Iraqis—though it is not yet clear whether their helicopters have left Oman. The Iranians subsequently guaranteed the security of the strait.

Only on last Saturday, October 4, the day when the second *Financial Times* story discussing "the most dangerous moment", did the US press finally get a semi-fix on the situation. Bernard Gwertzman's story in the *New York Times* was headed "U.S. Said to Act to Prevent Attack by Iraq from Oman." The *Washington Post* story, by Michael Getler and George C. Wilson, ran under the lengthier "U.S. Officials Say Diplomatic Action Headed Off Iraqi Escalation of War".

The *Times* quoted "diplomatic sources" and the *Post* "Carter administration officials". Both implied that Carter's men had acted wisely and well, which might make one suspect that the *Financial Times* story had been studied in Washington and prompt action taken to scuttle any innuendo that the US had been on the verge of impetuous and possibly disastrous action. The *Washington Post* helpfully stated that "military officials" had agreed that "President Carter and US allies can take credit for dampening down the war by pressing Oman..." but added in its conclusion that "The administration's officials who provided information on the administration role in the dampening down of this situation could not be identified under rules of the briefing given reporters."

It's a might-have-been, but not a pleasant one to

contemplate had the US actually intervened, all guns blazing in the Persian Gulf and the president rushing before the networks to announce his bid to save the oil gullet through Hormuz. Reagan's advisers still talk nervously of an "October surprise". Maybe the CIA officials who briefed Ron and George omitted to mention that they had nearly suffered the surprise before the end of September but were saved from it by the Carrington visit.

The Use of Their Limbs

The *Newsweek* cover story on political cartoonists was not such a bad idea, even if ABC's Issue and Answers looked at the same theme a couple of weeks earlier by putting on cartoonists. But *Newsweek* was a bit nerveless, even so. The nearest it got to the politics of its cover subject was to have Jeff McNelly say "I think that basically Reagan hasn't outraged me as much as Carter."

Now McNelly is certainly brilliant, but he is also extremely right wing in his views, at least as I see them displayed in the *Daily News*. McNelly is as much a chapter in the onward march to the right as is the *Washington Post's* featuring of the ghastly Emmett Tyrell.

And how can a story on political cartooning in this election year omit all mention of Gary Trudeau and Doonesbury, even if Trudeau defected from *Newsweek's* corporate partner in crime, the *Washington Post*? Ask Jerry Brown or John Anderson what effect Doonesbury had on their political campaigns. I've heard both of them discourse lengthily on the topic. Did, finally, *Newsweek* think it just to omit all comment from and reflection on Jules Feiffer, who has had something to do with the development of political cartooning in the last couple of decades? Jules is bulging with brains and has recently been rendered doubly attractive by a handsome beard.

Vanessa: Ars Lick Vita

The *Amsterdam News* has a front-page headline this weekend, shouting "ATTRACTIVE 19-YEAR OLD STRANGLED". The page-two story was brief enough indicating that Lorraine Snell of Brooklyn had been found strangled in an automobile. But it's one of those headlines that make one think of opposites. Would Lorraine have made the front page if she had been PLAIN or downright UGLY? I had the same sort of reaction to all those reviews of Vanessa Redgrave's performance in *Playing for Time* implying that she had a somehow been vindicated by an excellent performance, and that charge that she was unfit through stated political views to represent the character had been consequently demolished.

But suppose Redgrave had turned in a lousy performance. Would all the critics have then argued that this proved that life had carried through into art, that an espouser of Palestinian rights should have been barred from the casting room, that Erroll Flynn was a rotten actor because he was a secret Nazi sympathiser, that